

## An Autumn Evening.

The dusk is settling over the hedgerows and out along the fields. The work of day is accomplished, and all have eaten and gathered before the fire to say the evening's Rosary. As it is finished, the Pentacle is made, and little stools are gathered as everyone takes her place about the fire. It is done with a dance-like grace, there is no scuffle or confusion, for indeed, each movement of each person has been made an hundred times before. A movement out of place will be met with a sharp rebuke or a slap from an "elder sister", but this rarely happens. The response to such a reprimand is a curtsy from a maid or a reverence from a man. One disharmony is cancelled out by another, and themis is restored. The inward response, even from the most adult person, is what the modern world would think of as childlike: intense mortification, which is quite forgotten within a few minutes.

It was a crisp, smokey autumn evening, and already the dusk was thickening into night. The lady of the house, donna Marienna, seated in her arm chair beside the fire, called for an oil lamp to be lighted. The guests were conducted to the places prepared for them, each according to her estate. An owl hooted without. Often the night's tales and discourse began with a discussion of the events of the day - crops, weather, fairies, accidents and a thousand other things might set the spark to some piece of traditional lore; but this night it was the owl's cry which begun the talking.

"Does that be a bad token?" asked a boy as pieces of embroidery, knitting or carving were brought out - idleness was not encouraged, at least, not until later in the evening.

"Not unless she does enter the house," said donna Marienna, "though some do say that if owls do make noise about the house on three nights successively a death shall come, but that I credit not."

"Perhaps she will be the baxter's\* daughter." put in old Faith, who sat opposite the mistress in another arm chair.

"Who was she?" asked one of the girls.

"Most truly, I cannot tell you." said Faith, for it was custom to refuse so direct a request the first time.

"Mother, I would count it a blessing if you should instruct my little ones." said the mother of the girl.

"Then so be it." answered Faith, "There once was a pleasant baxter maid that lived not so far from this; and she did have a daughter that was not so goodly a child as she.

"One day there came to the door a poor travelling-maid with all the dust of a long highway upon her tattered clothes, and this one asked the girl an she would give her a piece of dough; so this girl gave her just a little bit and it was put in the oven with the other loaves. But when it was ready, the little bit of dough had grown bigger than all the loaves. Well, the girl wasn't about to let the travelling

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\*Baxter, the traditional feminine word for baker. The masculine is Baxteren. The term survives in the surname as do other traditional<sup>feminine</sup> craft names such as webster (weaver) brewster (brewer) etc.

maid have this, so she gave her another piece of dough, not half the size of the first. And when this was baked, why, it came out even bigger than the first one. 'You can't have that, mother', says the girl, and gives her another bit not the size of your thumb. Well, sure enough, when it's baked, it comes out as a great brown crusty loaf bigger than either of the other two.

"By this time, the tight-handed girl is starting to think that things aren't as they might be, so she turns herself around to take another look at the travelling-maid. But now, the travelling maid has thrown off her old ragged cloak, and standing there, tall as the silver birch tree and shining with the light of Heaven. Why, the greedy girl can't find her words at all, and the only thing she can stutter out is 'Who?...Who?...Who?...'"

"And that is all you shall ever say!" quoth the shining one "For thy greed and hardness have troubled this world too long. And therewithal, she struck the girl with her staff, whereat she was transformed into an owl, and flew out into the night, crying 'Whoo, whoo, whoo.'"

There was a shimmering silence, broken by donna Marienna: "You may stand, mistress Melissa." A tall fair girl rose to her feet. "If you cannot mind your work while you mind the telling, you must speak with Mistress Sally." Sally is the popular name for willow, and refers to the light willow switch or bundle of willow twigs used to keep discipline in a Madrian household. Melissa curtsied deeply, and donna Marienna smiled. "You may take your place." She did so, bending diligently over her work.

"Who, then, was the travelling-maid?" asked another girl.

"Who shall say?" answered Faith, "In the passed times, many great ones did come on the earth, and even, some do say, our Lady Herself." (everyone made the Pentacle on herself) "But I do think perhaps it was Lady Moira."

"Perhaps" said another, "she was not really transformed directly, but was born in the form of an owl in another life."

"That may be so," said Faith, "but don't'ee, my child, make to free to play fast-and-loose with the old traditions, just to render them conformable to what seems probable. When you live as long as I have, you'll have seen a strange thing or two, if you've not kept your eyes shut."

"Who'd live with her eyes shut, mother?" asked a little one.

"Most of the sheep out there on the mountain." answered Faith, meaning non-Madrians - the sheep who have strayed from the fold and are out on the mountain at night. "Even the darkest unbeliever has a strange tale to tell before she dies, ai, one at the least. For all of them are shown the folly of their unbelief; but they do close their eyes and pretend they have not seen. Like old hedgehog, *but* they curl up tight on themselves and stick their prickles out and hope the Truth can't touch them. And no more it can, if they won't have it; <sup>just</sup> for this present life, at any rate, though its a cold awaking-up when it does come."

"Do the great ones come among us yet?" asked

Melissa, full of romantic curiosity.

"'Tis not so often as it was," said Faith, for the darkening days are on us, but most surely, it does happen still from time to time; and I shall tell you of it on a greater night than this." Certain special tales were reserved for the telling at festival times appropriate to them.

"And are they the Geniae of Heaven, these great ones?" pursued Melissa. This time answer was given by donna Marienna. "Sometime they are, and sometime not," she said, "Not so long ago, a saintly maid did walk upon the hillside, and did meet Queen Colwyn the Fair. Ai, tall she was, and comely of aspect, and the golden tresses of her hair did come down to the skirts of her dress. Noble her bearing, with shield and sword and tall shining helmet, that this maid was filled with reverence and awe, and like to hide herself. But Queen Colwyn said: 'Fear not, my child, for thy heart is most chaste and precious, and I would gladly talk with thee.' So they did walk upon the hillside and talk upon the state of the land in these times, and on many another thing, until Queen Colwyn said that she must go, and she said to the maid 'tell thou thy kinsfolk thou hast met with me.'"

"'It is like they will misbelieve me.' said the child.

"'Clasp thy hands together," said the Queen, and the maid did even as she was bidden, "now open them again." again, the maid obeyed, and as she did, a butterfly flew forth from her fingers. 'Henceforth, when ever you do this, a butterfly shall come forth.' And so it was, and ever afterward, this maid was known far and near as the butterfly maiden. And I

need not tell you that none had the smallest difficulty in believing her tale of how she met Queen Colwyn the Fair upon the hillside."

"Why does Queen Colwyn come among us?" asked another of the children.

"'Tis said" replied donna Marienna, "that she comes once in every hundred years, that she may see if the time is ready when she will lead the People\* in battle to drive the infidels from her land."

"It is like that when she next comes will be the time, I think." said Melissa.

"Then be sure your eye is true and your quiver well provided, for she may most likely come in your time, little one."

A few moments ago, Gilrois, donna Marienna's man, had left the room, now he returns, carrying a large stone jug. He is a most welcome sight, for the ale brewed in donna Marienna's household is famous for many a long mile. Goblets are filled. "To whom shall we drink?" asks donna Marienna.

"To Queen Colwyn." urges Melissa.

"So then be it. Let us raise our goblets to Queen Colwyn the Fair of Brigantia; swift be her coming and her sword victorious, that the law of heaven may reign upon the earth at the end as it was in the beginning."

"To Queen Colwyn the Fair!"

"Haya Niké!"

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\*Traditional Madrians often refer to the community of the faithful as the People.

As the ale is drunk, Melissa speaks to donna Marienna: "Domina, an it please you, can we hear a real tale of Queen Colwyn."

"Have you not heard a real tale this night, my child?" teased donna Marienna, "I know not how to make a tale more real than that one."

"I mean one of the days when she reigned upon the earth."

"I can tell you one of the days before she reigned upon the earth, if that will satisfy you." All those present expressed great satisfaction in this proposal, and so donna Marienna commenced thus:

"It was in those days before Queen Colwyn won back her throne, and the fair land of Brigantia lay in the hand of tyrant infidels, even as it does this day; for her mother, Queen Dictynna had been murdered by the infidel king Mider, whom she had trusted. In those days, the number of Queen Colwyn's followers was so small that if Mider's men could have found them, he would have put a swift end to all her hopes of bringing the land back within the law of themis.

"Upon one day the very thing happened that she was feared of, and a great troop of Mider's men came upon her little band at a time when they were far from the cover of the forest.

"'Lay on and put them to the sword!' cried the captain of the troop.

"Morrigan the Falconer, that was Colwyn's noble lieutenant, and dark as her mistress was fair, put her hand upon her sword; 'An it is battle they are thirsting for, so they shall drink it to the lees this day.' she

cried.

"'Nai, nai,' said her mistress 'put up thy sword, black Morrigan, for they are too many and we too few, and the season is not yet come. Today we must run like the wild hare beneath Columbina's moon.'"

"Therewith the Brigantes fled and the tyrant's men gave chase, and feathered shafts, the swift-winged messengers of death, flew forth on either side. Yet the chase was not equal, for when a maid fell wounded among the Brigantes, she could not be left behind to be slain, and therefore must be carried with them; and so, as more maids fell, the flight of the Brigantes waxed slower.

"At last, fair Colwyn, running at the front, led them to a long and narrow bridge that led across a wide and rushing river. Standing herself aside, she watched her children pass over and then took her station at the head of the bridge. Now this bridge was so narrow that only one person at a time could come up to her; and the captain of the tyrant troop sent to her a big man named Eldred, who said 'Let us pass or most surely I will cut thee down.'

"'Get thee home,' replied Queen Colwyn, 'for thou shalt not cross over this bridge until Colwyn of the Brigantes wills it so.'

"Thereupon, Eldred drew his great sword, and called to his manservant to hold forth a stout bar of iron. Then, with one blow, he struck the bar of iron in twain. 'See what a sword it is that thou contend with!' he cried.

"Then did Queen Colwyn take a fine lace

kerchief, and holding it high in the air, let it float to the ground. But as it fell, she drew her sword, and with one stroke, she cut it clean in twain, and fell in two pieces at her feet. 'See what a sword it is that thou contendest with.' quoth she.

"Eldred marvelled at this stroke, but cried 'Then if thou wilt not move, maiden, lay on!'"

"'Tis a sad day has fallen on Brigantia when a maid must curb her menfolk with a sword and not a willow rod, but if thou'lt have it so, so be it then.' Angered by her words, Eldred rushed upon her. Queen Colwyn fixed her eyes upon his, smiling merrily, but moved not a hair. Eldred raised his great sword to deal her such a blow as should cleave her body in twain from the top of her head to her belly, but still she moved not. Then, just as the blow was but a finger's breadth from her, she leapt aside with the speed of a cat, and her sword flashed in the sunlight. Eldred's sword bit deep into the timber of the bridge, and his head fell beside it.

Queen Colwyn laughed aloud. 'There lies a loyal subject truly', she cried, 'which man among you next will offer his head in tribute to his queen?' Then did many men come up to her, one upon another, and each one she felled as he tried to slay her, until at last the men grew afraid to approach her. But the captain of the tyrant's men was not dismayed. 'Truly, he said, calling his men about him, we shall no longer send our warriors to fight her, but shall shoot her down with arrows where she stands. But though their volleys darkened the skies, Queen Colwyn's enchanted buckler did stay them all.

"With renewed anger, the captain again

sent his men against her in hopes she might grow weary; but again she cut them down as quickly as they came, until again they fell back in fear. At last the captain called his men about him. 'Surely, he said, it is too late now for us to capture Colwyn's maids, even if we should cross the bridge this very moment. But we have caught ourselves a greater prize, for we have Colwyn herself. We shall send off riders to bring fresh men to watch the bridge, and others shall cross the river by another bridge and take her from behind. And even if she cannot be taken when she is attacked from both sides at once, she dare not step off the bridge, and she must starve, else fall asleep and be slain.'

"Yet even as the captain was engaged in this talk, Queen Colwyn did whistle high and loud, like to a maiden that whistles up the wind; and faster than the wind itself came Granya, Colwyn's white mare that had been waiting on the far side of the bridge. As Granya sped past, Queen Colwyn leapt upon her back. Roused by the clatter of hooves upon timber, the tyrants men looked up, but already, in one leap, Granya was in their very midst, and the startled warriors scattered before Queen Colwyn's **flashing** blade. In another leap, Granya was beyond them, and in a third she had left them far behind, and was heading for the woodlands. When they recovered themselves, the tyrants men gave chase, but there was not a steed in all the land that could come up with fiery-hooved Granya.

"So it did pass that Mider found not his prey that day, nor any day thereafter, for 'the lawless wolf shall have his season, then shall the courteous hunting-hound have hers'."

"Would that season shall come soon again."

said Melissa.

"Would that it may," said donna Marienna "but God knows best; for She will do what She will do, and blessed is Her Name." Everyone made the Pentacle upon herself, and thoughts turned towards the evening's prayers.

"An apple shall be put by each child's bed for the morning who has worked well this day," said donna Marienna - child here really meant everyone, and the apples would be much prized as tokens of the mistress's favour, a whisper of excitement passed about the room. "Let each of you contemplate the meaning of the apple in this apple-season."

"Contemplation is very difficult to me." said Marienna.

"Then you must speak to Madria when she comes." said donna Marienna "That will be very soon."

"Truly the child's difficulty puts me in mind of a tale." said Gilrois.

"I bid you share it with us." said donna Marienna (it is not, of course, custom for a man to make refusal to his wife, even in the matter of telling a tale).

"There was a priestess rode a fine horse with proud and shining harness. One day, she travelled away from her village and came upon a proud maiden that she knew not. 'Where did you come by that fine horse, Madria?' asked the maiden.

"Most truly, my daughter," said the priestess, it was a gift to me from my children in the village wherein I dwell.'

"'By my oath,' said the ungracious maid  
'I am full as pious as any priestess, and  
none hath given me a gift for it.'

"'Well then,' said the priestess, 'perhaps  
I can put a remedy to that. If thou canst  
say the Silver Star with they mind fully  
upon it and not divert thy thoughts once  
from the remembrance of our Lady, then I do  
declare that this horse shall be thine and  
I shall walk upon my way.'

"'Why, that is an easy matter.' laughed  
the maid, and she knelt down there and then  
to say her prayer aloud. Well, she had just  
said the word 'splendour', when she broke  
off, asking 'And shall I have the saddle and  
harness also?' So she did lose her wager.

Everyone laughed, until donna Marienna held  
up her hand. She arose, and went to kneel  
meekly before the statue of our Lady, and all  
the 'children' gathered about her.

The moon was enthroned high in the heaven,  
shedding her pale light across the autumn  
fields. A reverent quietness settled on all  
the earth, as the mistress of the house called  
upon the Queen of Heaven, and all Her radiant  
Geniae to look down upon her little household  
and to grant their protection to all the shining  
souls that they had put into her care.